

March 2003

Equalities and diversity

The following submission from Joseph Rowntree Foundation is in response to the government's consultation "Equalities and Diversity; Making it Happen". The comments are in relation to the three options for institutional arrangements (fully integrated single equality body, "single gateway" approach, overarching body) and also to some of the fundamental issues which underpin the discussions.

General lessons from JRF programmes

We are drawing on the learning from our current programmes. In summary:-

- The Foundation's mission is to address the "root causes of evil and weakness". It is important to recognise that the causes (and lived experience) of ageism, disablism, sexism and racism can have similarities and differences. It would be important that any new structure had the potential to reflect this diversity, rather than being seen as an amalgam for the convenience of society as a whole.
- However, equality should not be seen as a zero-sum game between different groups. It would be important that, whatever the solution, the needs of disabled people, older people, women, Black & Minority Ethnic communities were not seen as being in competition for recognition. It is important to strengthen the hand of all.

Given the above, it seems that all three options outlined in the consultation document could have merit. The most important preconditions for effectiveness are (to use the government's own sentiments)

- That the government commits adequate resources;
- For the structures to have a strong and convincing measure of independence.

A further precondition is for the new structure(s) to demonstrate how they will handle the issues of shared Human & Civic Rights, coupled with the diverse circumstances and experiences of different groups. The Devil is in the detail.

Specific comments

In terms of specific actions over the next few years, it seems right that, since the Disability Rights Commission has only recently started to develop its work on behalf of disabled people, it should be encouraged in continuing to develop that work in the interim. In the Social Model of Disability and ideas of Independent Living, disabled people have arguably the most coherent and consistent approach to ideas of Equality and Diversity. However, Disability

Equality in the mainstream is at a much less advanced stage than may be true of agendas in some other areas of social exclusion.

It is also important to note that other groups (older people, for example) have even less of a presence in terms of the current Commissions. Older people have told us that they are waiting for their equality issues to come prominently on the agenda. It would be important for the government to demonstrate its interim vision for groups who lack a Commission focus at present.

Organisational structures are important. However, structures need a frame of reference to be able to say whether or not people are being treated equally. The consultation document rightly makes reference to different equality legislation and making it more coherent and easier to use. It can, at times, be frustrating (in considering the Disability Discrimination Act, for example) to try to work out which aspects of Disabled People's lives do or do not come within the remit of the Act. It may be that the important issue is **less** about an overarching body and **more** about an overarching expectation of the standards that people should expect.

The common message coming through our programmes about Older People, Independent Living and Race Equality is the need for fairness and transparency about such standards. It is important to move beyond very necessary measures of exclusion (for example, the very good work that Help the Aged and Kings Fund are undertaking about indicators of Ageism) and move towards meaningful expectations of Rights and Entitlements. The framework for work on Independent Living, for example, is about the need to acknowledge Human and Civic Rights (the human rights to health; civic rights of Disabled Parents in relation to fulfilling their role as parents vis-à-vis their children's education) and to the entitlements needed to achieve these rights. The need for structures for equality goes hand in hand with standards and expectations for equality. It would be important for the government to develop its own thinking about how these commitments can be developed in practice.

Finally, the government's own consultation refers to the importance of involvement and consultation. This is constructive and important, and a point to be encouraged and developed beyond this specific consultation document.